

Documents on Diplomacy: Lessons

Walk the Line: The Webster-Ashburton Treaty

"The portraits of Webster and Ashburton that hang on the walls of the State Department in Washington commemorate two negotiators whose happy cooperation solved a problem the solution of which might in the hands of lesser men, have been remitted to the sword."

James Bryce, 1914

Standard: II. Time, Continuity, and Change
V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
VI. Power, Authority, and Governance
IX. Global Connections
X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Grade Level: 9–12

Objectives: The student will:
● Analyze the specifics of the Webster–Ashburton Treaty
● Follow the diplomatic maneuvering of Webster and Ashburton
● Evaluate the treaty from the United States' perspective
● Correlate diplomacy and resolution of a conflict

Time: 1–2 class periods

Materials: Document: 1842 Webster–Ashburton Treaty

Resources: *Behind the Scenes Geography Cards* [Cut into cards prior to activity. Drawings for Disputed Lands, Maine, and Wisconsin Territory should be cut to show their actual outlines.]
Map of the Webster–Ashburton Treaty, 1842

Procedures:

Setting the Stage: The Task

Settle the boundary dispute between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada. The absence of an acceptable resolution to this long-standing boundary dispute was a continual irritant to relations between the United States and Great Britain—and had been so since the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

Setting the Stage: The Negotiators

Daniel Webster, the Secretary of State, was the key negotiator on the American side. Webster had previously traveled to England and had met key figures in the British government, including Lord Ashburton. He was widely admired and the British were delighted that he was the leader of the American delegation.

Lord Alexander Ashburton was well-known in American political and financial circles. His wife was a member of a prominent Philadelphia family and he had visited the United States many times. The Americans were equally delighted that Ashburton had been chosen as the chief British negotiator.

Setting the Stage: The Location

The two diplomats decided to meet in less formal circumstances, feeling that informality would lead to productive talks. As a result, no official minutes of their meetings were kept. The Treaty itself is the only evidence of their negotiations.

Ashburton's home on Lafayette Square, which was the site of the British Legation, was the main venue for the negotiations. [Today, the house is a U.S. National Historic Landmark.]

The negotiations took place during the hot summer of 1842. . . .

1. Share information from *Setting the Stage* with students.
2. Distribute copies of the document, *The Webster-Ashburton Treaty*.
3. Write the following words on the board:
 - a. Boundaries
 - b. Extradition
 - c. African slave trade
4. Explain that these are the primary disputes resolved by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. Assign one topic to each third of the class. There is no need to move into groups.
5. Have students create three sections on a sheet of paper headed by the three treaty topics. They should read the treaty (beginning with Article I) and:
 - a. Identify the article(s) involved with their assigned topic.
 - b. Record the terms established for that topic.

Note: For "Boundaries," Articles I and II are extremely specific geographically. Provide students with a map of the United States and Canada. They should try to follow the main locations identified to APPROXIMATE the boundaries established (Article I: defines the border

between northern Maine and New Brunswick; Article II: settles the border between the future state of Minnesota and Canada, along Lake Superior to the north.)

If students struggle with this section, allow them to work in pairs. These boundaries will be clarified in the mapping activity, No. 7 below.

- c. Have students share the information collected so that all can complete the three sections.
- d. Share information from *Behind the Scenes* with students.

6. (*Note to teacher: The remainder of this activity is NOT as complex as it first seems!*)

Before conducting the *Walk the Line* activity, the teacher should use the map of the *Webster-Ashburton Treaty, 1842* as a guide to create this mapping activity.

- a. Choose a location in the classroom, preferably in the center of the room so that students can stand around the exterior of the map and to stand individually in locales within the border. This is very important. (If classroom space is not available, move students to a more open location within the school.)
- b. Fix masking tape on the floor to approximate the boundary line between the United States and Canada. The line may be rudimentary since the bodies of water and other locations will be obvious once the activity begins. [*The masking tape border should be placed on the floor before beginning the "Walk."*]

7. Explain to students that it is time for them to "Walk the Line" established by Webster and Ashburton.

8. Have students gather east and west of the boundary line.

9. To establish geographic starting points, the teacher should place the *Geography Cards* for Maine and Lake Superior in their "approximate" locations. You will revisit Maine shortly.

- a. Distribute the Geography Cards to students. As you call each of the places below, have the student with that card move to stand at what they believe is the location.
- b. If the student chooses the correct location, he/she should place the card on the floor map and rejoin the other students surrounding the map.
Placements: Canada, New Brunswick, New Hampshire, New York, Michigan, Lake Michigan, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Massachusetts, Lake Huron, Lake of the Woods, Wisconsin Territory, and Iowa Territory.

10. The class now has the main locations identified. However, they must visualize the borders established by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty.

11. Have the student place the cut-out, *Maine—Showing Border Areas Disputed with Canada*, on top of the Maine Geography Card. [The Webster-Ashburton Treaty Map will be useful at this point.] Have another student “Walk the Line” by drawing in red the final negotiated boundary of Maine.

Refer to *Behind the Scenes*, if needed, to explain to students how the boundary line was determined. Relate the story of “Fort Blunder.” Ask students if this boundary favors the United States? Did the Americans get a good deal? Why would some Americans feel that the United States should have received ALL of the disputed land?

Introduce the idea that the “war of words” between the United States and Great Britain did NOT result in a third war between the two countries. Diplomacy prevailed. Discuss the benefits of this outcome at this juncture of U.S. history.

12. Have a student “Walk the Line” to the northwestern shore of Lake Superior. As the information in *Behind the Scenes* reveals, this land became part of the deal offered by Lord Ashburton.

13. Have the same student place the cut-out of “Wisconsin Territory” between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods. Then, have another student “Walk the Line” and draw a red line across the land received by the United States. Refer a student to a current political map of the United States and identify which state emerged from this disputed territory.

Ask students what the potential advantages of this boundary resolution might be. Remind students that this peaceful acquisition of land might not have occurred if Ashburton and Webster’s negotiations for the Maine boundary had failed. It was icing on the cake. Reveal to students the later discovery of iron ore in this region (see *Behind the Scenes* for key information).

14. If possible, leave the masking tape boundary on the floor. Tape the cards previously used to their appropriate placements. If the teacher cannot retain the map, keep map cards for use as a review. [These cards could be used again with the lesson, *Look Him Straight in the Eye: The Oregon Dispute with Great Britain*.]

15. Have students return to their seats. Complete the “Walk the Line” activity by having students create a mental Tally Sheet. Which country—the United States or Great Britain—emerged victorious from the Webster-Ashburton boundary decisions? Is it necessary to declare a “winner?” Might not BOTH countries have benefitted from decisions made by Daniel Webster and Lord Ashburton? Students should address these questions in a brief paragraph, completed in class or for homework. Instruct students that the title of the paragraph should include the term, **DIPLOMACY**.

Extension Activities:

Continue the *Walk the Line* geography activity in the lesson *Look Him Straight in the Eye: The Oregon Dispute with Great Britain*. In that lesson, you will extend the U.S. boundary to the Pacific Coast. ■